

Press Release

Kyzylkia Youth Initiative Group Helps Children with Special Needs

On December 9th 2008 the Mercy Corps sponsored Youth Initiative Group in Kyzylkiya organized a learning skills contest among children with physical disabilities. The event was part of the Small Grants program implemented by the USAID-funded Collaborative Development Initiative (CDI) project in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Many schools in Kyrgyzstan lack adequate teaching staff, funding and other resources to be able to offer proper education even to children without special needs. For disabled youth access to proper education is virtually nonexistent in most places. Reportedly only one percent of all the disabled children in Kyrgyzstan are able to attend school. In Kyzylkia town, the regular schools do not provide the special conditions appropriate for these children. As a result, their disadvantages are magnified by a lack of a full education, reduced chances for socialization and often, stigmatization by other children.



CDI-established youth initiative group member Gulbadam Abdilla kyzy (l) helps Umutai Ergesheva (r) read aloud. Photo: Mercy Corps

In a CDI program to assist and support enterprising young people who are willing respond to the needs of their own communities and take initiative to address common problems, small grants of an average of USD 500 are awarded to the best ideas proposed by youth initiative groups. In this case, the Kyzylkiya youth group won such a grant to help special needs students with epilepsy and mental and physical disabilities. Their objectives were to help the children improve their basic academic skills and to provide them opportunities to socialize with other people.

"I was very doubtful this project would work out," says Tahmina Alimbekova, the coordinator for CDI's partner organization SPARK. "The disabled children refused to talk to us, some of them were even crying when we first met," she said.



"I wanted to be an economist. But after the CDI project, I decided to be a psychologist to provide qualified assistance to disabled people," says the youth initiative group leader Samara Mumbaeva (second left). Photo: Mercy Corps

But through regular meetings, individual home visits, and participation in games, drawing exercises, and reading and writing lessons, the children became more open and engaged. Although the main project officially ended in July, the five members of the youth group, helped by a dozen other students, continued to work with the children and organize this contest. Now the youth group also plans to involve the children in their New Year's celebration activities, something that was previously out of reach for students with special needs

At the contest, these special kids who are typically shy and alienated, were happily reading aloud and singing in front of the guests. One parent reported that her son had become noticeably less aggressive after interaction with the youth group. The children also attend school more often than in the past.

The Kyzylkiya youth initiative group has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to help address important community issues and actively participate in solutions. In doing so they exemplify one of CDI's key objectives, that of encouraging youth to play an active role in their communities.